

# NEWS

## If the Shoe Fits

An ex-Nike designer has plans for a better sneaker.

BY DAVE FITZPATRICK

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Something's afoot in Aloha.

Literally. Following in the footsteps of Nike founder Bill

Bowerman, a 49-year-old

inventor is tak-

ing the Oregon tradition of homebrewed sneaker science one big step further.

"It's a custom shoe, on demand, in a minute," explains Rob Lyden, who founded Q Branch Inc. from his suburban home and has patented the Q-Shoe and Q-Boot, which he hopes to put on people's feet within the next year.

Essentially, the Q-Shoe—short for Quintessential Shoe—is built around a unique carbon fiber spring, which serves as heel and shock absorber. Like the rest of Lyden's fully modular system, it can be completely personalized for such mitigating factors as height, weight and even orthopedic issues. Pigeon-toed? No problem. Left foot slightly longer than the right? Again, some fine-tuning erases discomfort.

"If everyone's different, why is everyone getting the same thing?" asks Lyden, who invented shoes for Nike from 1990 to '96.

Custom-made shoes aren't new. But the way Lyden plans to deliver them is. The idea is simple, even if the technology is not: A customer walks into a store and selects a tread pattern, shoe style, color and size. Then, she chooses an insole, which features a light-sensitive polymer. She stands on the insole while blue-spectrum beams "cure" it to the contours of her feet. Meanwhile, the sales rep pops the rest of the shoe together with a single fastener. The liner is slipped in and, swoosh, a pair of high-tech, form-fitting footwear is ready—not in a couple of weeks but in a couple of minutes—at a price of only \$99.

Just as important as variety and affordability, he believes his next-generation footwear will eliminate overseas production and environmentally unsafe glues.

"My aim is to create a shoe that is truly green, recyclable, biodegradable and customizable," he says. In keeping with his business philosophy, he isn't seeking the endorsements of big-name athletes,

either. He believes people will "vote with their feet" and choose his products over the competition.

An avid runner, Lyden served as a track coach at the University of Minnesota. He's also coached distance runners and Olympians Karl Keska and Steve Plasencia and authored a hefty book titled *Distance Running*.

Lyden's inventive exploits don't end with human footwear; he's also designed naturally conforming horseshoes. In 2000, Lyden flew to Abu Dhabi to coach a horse owned by H.H. Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed Al Nahyan, a son of the founder of the United Arab Emirates. Lyden's strategy proved good enough to help the horse set an equine 160k world record.

With dual MA's in public administration and modern European history, Lyden is a habitual entrepreneur who holds patents to such unlikely foot accessories as parabolic ice-skate blades and lowrider roller skates. Recently he branched out, promoting palm tree-shaped solar panels to be used as charging stations for electric vehicles and hydrogen production for fuel-cell cars.

"It isn't just about the money," says the tireless Lyden. "I think you have to have a sincere desire to do something good." **WW**

**ROBE OF THE WEEK:** Rob Lyden's inventions didn't get him Phil Knight's job, but they did earn him some sheikh clothes.

